



EASTERN WHISKEY BOTTLES:

Names in the Glass

Don Denzin

So I get this phone call from a guy I don't know. I'm busy, but it turns out he collects antique bottles. Suddenly, I've got plenty of time to talk.

"What do you know about a bottle embossed H.F. & B. N.Y.?" he asks. "I have one."

"Very little," I respond honestly. "I think one sold at auction a few years ago for a handsome price." I'm trying to remember the catalog photo. Dark glass, I think. Odd looking piece. I'm pretty certain it's rare.

"Thanks," he says, "but who or what does H.F. & B. N.Y. stand for?"

"I don't know," I tell him.

"You said in your book the bottle was melon-shaped. What the heck is melon-shaped?"

"Well..." I'm stalling now. I can't summon the bottle to mind. There are literally thousands of embossed antique eastern whiskey bottles.

"I'm holding it now," he says. "It sure looks more like a bottle than a melon."

I'm grateful he's broken the silence and, okay; he's not holding a melon. But my curiosity is giving way to nervousness. I'm wondering if I botched the description in my book. A dazzlingly large list of bottle shapes, sizes, colors, and embossings could cause that.

We talk further. We discover we're both going to the Baltimore bottle show. He agrees to bring his bottle for me to look at. Cool!

"Thanks for anything you can tell me," he adds, as we're ready to hang up. "And, oh, I almost forgot. My bottle looks like it was made in a snap case. Got all the marks. Your book doesn't say anything about that."

Yeah. Thanks. This is not so cool, I concede silently. Now I'm sure I've botched the description. After all, how many H.F. & B. N.Y. bottles can there be? And just how much can anyone really know about

old bottles anyway?

Information

We collectors of antique bottles want it. That's why, for many of us, the sequence was the same. We acquired our first bottles. Then we acquired our first bottle books. We appreciated old

glass for what it was, but we wanted – and want – more.

Fortunately, as the bottle collecting enterprise has matured over the years, researchers have unearthed information just as people with shovels have freed glass from the ground. We are in debt to both kinds of diggers. We even acknowledge that, in some ways, their pursuits are similar. Each seeks elusive relics from a bygone era. A bitters bottle and a bitters advertisement are both historical objects, after all. The difference is that one looks good in the light; the other sheds it.

It is in the spirit of shedding light that this and future articles offer information on pre-prohibition, U.S. spirits bottles from the eastern states. Since research is about putting together puzzles a piece at a time, these pages present pieces, even when the larger picture itself may remain incomplete. These pages, therefore, blend information and an invitation. If you can use the information, fine. If you have unpublished information to share, please share it. Contact me through this magazine's editor, and I'll try to include your bottle facts in a future article.



This article deals with three spirits distributors whose names appear in glass: Turner Brothers, B.M. & E.A. Whitlock, and, yes, H.F. & B. N.Y. It summarizes what is generally known already and provides what may be "new" information to many collectors.

Turner Brothers

No matter what kind of bottles grace their shelves, nearly all collectors recognize the raised letters, TURNER BROTHERS. At least three distinct bottles with that embossing exist. Perhaps most in demand is a glass barrel that occurs in a range of colors – usually shades of amber and yellow green. A pair of these from the Burton Spiller collection fetched healthy four-digit prices at auction. Two different square bottles also exist.

TURNER BROTHERS / NEW YORK / BUFFALO NY / SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Square bottle, dark green, 10 inches tall, smooth base, embossing on four lines, c. 1850's.

TURNER BROTHERS / NEW YORK, BUFFALO, NY / & SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Square bottle, dark green, 10 inches tall, smooth base, embossing on three lines, c. 1850's.

TURNER BROTHERS / NEW YORK

Figural barrel, amber and greenish colorations; square collared mouth, 9 1/2 to 10 inches tall, ten rings above and ten rings below middle section, c. 1855-1865.

According to Turner Brothers ads, the company was established in 1844 in Buffalo N.Y., and Thomas and James Turner first appear in the 1847 city directory as "manufacturers" of soda, mead, and beer. By the mid-1850's the firm had expanded its distribution to New York City and San Francisco, and produced "ginger wine, syrups, cordials, native wines, etc." In the 1850's, the firm is listed in New York City on Greenwich St. and later on Washington St.

The Buffalo listing for 1862 adds bitters to the product line, and "Turner's Forest Wine Bitters," is reported by Carlyn Ring. "Our goods are sold," the 1862 listing asserts, "at wholesale by the principal grocers, druggists, liquor and wine dealers... throughout North America and South America, and in many parts of Europe and Asia."

With such an impressively large distribution, the firm must have enjoyed considerable commercial success. Yet the business seemingly concluded after less than twenty years because 1862 is the last time Buffalo listings for Turner Brothers appear. Bill and Betty Wilson report that the San Francisco business was sold in 1865. It seems likely, therefore, that surviving Turner Brothers bottles are no younger than the era of the Civil War. Many are doubtless older.

There were actually six Turner Brothers, James, Malcolm, Archibald, George, Thomas, and Robert. Their portraits are depicted on product labels, or at least on the label pictured here, which comes from an unembossed cylinder with most of its contents intact.

B.M. & E.A. Whitlock

Several distinctive bottles commissioned with the names of these two New York City merchants have survived for collectors to acquire. Some are rare. All represent worthy additions to any collection that includes eastern whiskies. They probably date from between the mid 1850's and 1860's. The bottles include:

THE / OLD MILL / WHITLOCK & CO. embossing on applied seal "suspended" on bottle with a ribbon-like glass strand; amber cone-shaped bottle with applied handle; applied double lip; 8 1/4 inches tall; OP base.

AMBROSIAL / B.M. & E.A. W. & CO. embossing on applied seal; amber flattened chestnut bottle with applied handle; ring lip; 8 1/4 to 9 inches tall; OP base.

AMBROSIAL / B.M. & E.A. W. & CO. embossing on applied seal located at base of applied handle; amber flattened chestnut bottle; ring lip; 8 3/4 inches tall; OP base.

B.M. & E.A. WHITLOCK & CO / NEW YORK aqua figural barrel with four sets of dual rings; inverted, tapered lip that flares upward; 7 7/8 inches tall; OP base.

B.M. & E.A. WHITLOCK & CO aqua; bell-like shape; inverted, tapered lip that flares upward; 8 5/8 inches tall; OP base.

A square bottle, amber, with fancy, roped corners may also exist, though it remains to be fully documented.

Even though they were New York City businessmen, the Whitlocks, Benjamin M. and Edward A., were described by a contemporary at the height of the Civil War

as "Southern grocers and sympathizers." Whatever their leanings or lineage, their firm appears in New York directories throughout the first half of the 1860's. Sometime prior to this, the enterprise was identified as Whitlock, Nichols & Co. Interestingly, an advertising broadside dated 1853 mentions the "late B.M. Whitlock & Co." giving rise to speculation that the firm may have begun and ended an affiliation with Mr. Nichols. If so, this probably - though not necessarily - occurred before the bottles identified above were produced.

H.F. & B. N.Y.

Now to H.F. & B.N.Y. and the Baltimore bottle show. The guy on the phone turned out to be collector, George Burlock from Maryland, and he arrived on schedule with his bottle. To my delight, the glass container he showed me was completely different than the one I had described in the book. His bottle looked nothing like a melon. Darned if it didn't look just like a bottle! Clearly two different bottles existed, and his was undocumented. And what a bottle! It had six sides, two rings of glass encircling its neck, and shimmered with hammered crudeness through an almost ebony-like shade of puce. The Baltimore show was special that year!

But there's more to the story. Before meeting George, I toured the bottle show's tables. There, in the middle of the room, sat a melon-shaped H.F. & B. N.Y. bottle! What were the odds! I'm sure I dickered with the dealer over the price, but I don't remember much about our discussion because I just plain had to have that bottle! Neatly wrapped, it went under my arm in minutes. I felt like a digger who'd uncovered a treasure!

Imagine George's surprise when I handed him a bottle as he handed one to



me. We both now knew two different bottles existed. For the record, here are their descriptions:

H.F. & B. N.Y. letters within embossed shield; dark puce; melon-like bottle with fourteen vertical ribs; ring around neck; applied lip; 9 3/8 inches tall; smooth base; c. 1855 to 1865.

H.F. & B. N.Y. letters within embossed oval; dark puce; six-sided bottle with applied lip; 11 1/2 inches tall; smooth base, snap-case mold marks, c. 1855 to 1865.

Crude and nearly perfect, the two bottles made a great pair at the show. We frankly enjoyed seeing them side-by-side, perhaps reunited for the first time in more than 150 years. Other collectors who spotted the bottles also appreciated the impromptu exhibit.

But curious George still wanted to know. Whose were the embossed initials? The answer came a short time later from the New York City directory for 1857. H.F. & B. belonged to Joseph T. Hotchkiss, Thomas Fenner, and Henry Bennet, grocers and liquor dealers at 40 Vesey St. Of course, assigning names to the initials didn't make the bottles any "better." But it gave them a context. It answered our questions with information.

And besides, George said, "Thanks."

Don Denzin has collected American spirits bottles for 20 years. He is the author of the 1994 book, *Antique Eastern Whiskey Bottles*.

